

Promoting Religious Freedom During the Campaign Against Terrorism": Dr. Tamara Sonn Oral Testimony

November 27, 2001 DR. SONN: Thank you. And I'd like to comment the organizers of this panel for their careful articulation of key issues affecting religious freedom in the Muslim world. I was asked to address a number of topics, which is why I need the extra few minutes. I might even need 14 minutes for this. The conditions, trends and thinking in the Muslim world in general regarding human rights and religious freedom; what incentives can be offered to Pakistan and Afghanistan to encourage religious freedom; what tools in the campaign against terrorism can be used to promote human rights and religious freedom? Obviously, these are enormous and diverse topics at first glance, but what I'll try to show is that in fact interreligious hostilities and terrorism are in fact related through shared causes and cures. I've submitted my full testimony to the Commission, and I'll just summarize here as quickly as possible. To begin, it must be recognized that heightened mistrust of Christians and Jews in the Muslim world is a residual effect of colonialism. The Koran refers to these earlier monotheistic communities as peoples of the book, and their religious freedom is guaranteed under Islamic law. There was some animosity among these three groups, as the Koran notes, but overall they were told that religious diversity is a part of the divine plan, so Jews, Christians and Muslims must compete with one another in goodness. This is from the Koran. Throughout the centuries of Islamic dominance, interfaith relations were generally peaceful. Each community was subject to its own laws of personal status under the overall rubric of Islamic law, and forced conversions were forbidden in accordance, again, with the Koran. Relations were strained under the impact of the Crusades, but began to actually break down under the impact of modern European colonialism. In this context we must understand the viewpoint of the colonized Muslim majority, not because their viewpoint is correct or that they should feel as they do, but because it is the reality, and we have to understand it in order to deal with it effectively. In particular, with the sanctioning of European control over the Arab world following World War I, formerly trusted Christian citizens began to appear suspect. The creation of the State of Israel following upon large-scale immigration of European Jews was likewise viewed as treasonous collaboration of locals with foreign powers. The State of Israel, dominated by European culture, was, and for many Muslims remains, viewed as a mere extension of European colonialism. Modern hostility toward Jews and Christians in the Muslim world therefore is not so much a function of basic religious orientation as it is the result of political experience. This is evident in the work of early Islamic ideologues, from the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Hasan al-Banna, who said in the 1930s, "The West surely seeks to humiliate us, to occupy our lands and begin destroying Islam by annulling its laws and abolishing its traditions." To the speeches of Ayatollah Khomeini, who touched the emotions of his followers by asking, "Are we to be trampled under foot by the boots of America simply because we're a weak nation and have no dollars? America is worse than Britain. Britain is worse than America. The Soviet Union is worse than both of them. And these are all the enemies of Islam." Now, in broad historic perspective, which again we must understand, the goal of this kind of discourse is consciousness raising, and they were attempting to raise social awareness, to establish political solidarity in order to create an effective counterweight to foreign-dominated governments. In the short term, however, they forged a victim mentality that is easily transformed into a revolutionary or jihadist outlook. Sayed Qutb, for example, another Muslim Brotherhood ideologue said, "What is required is that a believing group place their hands in the hands of God and then march forth, the promise of God being for them the overriding reality." So the belief in a worldwide campaign to destroy Islam lies at the root of both interreligious hostilities and terrorism, and these roots have been growing throughout the past century of colonial domination and post-colonialism, which resulted in socioeconomic and political marginalization for the majority of formerly colonized people. The longer those conditions exist, the greater the sense of desperation among the victims, and the greater the possibility that this desperation can be radicalized under the influence of preachers stressing not the Koran's overriding religious tolerance, but its repeated commands to struggle against oppression. In other words, people suffering under sustained conditions of economic, social and political marginalization become ready recruits for radicalization. People in these conditions, when offered rewards that will remove them from their humiliation and hopelessness, may be susceptible to manipulation by terrorist leaders. This pattern of transition from poverty and hopelessness to victim mentality to hostility toward non-Muslim victimizers, to outright radicalization, is evident in the case of Pakistan and Afghanistan as well. What can be done about it? The first step is a clear understanding of its causes, of course, but given that understanding, the understanding of the roots of religious conflict and terrorism, we can address the question of possible incentives, particularly in the campaign against terrorism, to promote interreligious and sectarian harmony. Our campaign against terrorism has three tracks: military, diplomatic and humanitarian. The military track may be effective in targeting some terrorists, but the diplomatic and humanitarian tracks will be necessary to address terrorism as such. On the political front, most obviously, the financial support for terrorism must be destroyed, and that process is well under way. Second, we must strengthen the positions of governments who share our understanding of the connection between marginalization, radicalization and religious violence, and who are willing to work against it. This is the case with the current government in Pakistan, which is the first Pakistani Government in recent years willing to confront sectarianism, but without political and economic support that allows it to offer better options than those offered by the sectarian jamaats, the Islamists political parties, who are also filling the gap of education, its efforts will not be effective. The specific needs of Pakistan are the same as those outlined in my testimony before this Commission just over a year ago, September 18th, in fact, a year ago. Economic assistance in the form of debt relief; humanitarian aid in the form of support for the Afghan and Kashmiri refugees, whose numbers have swollen during the present military campaign in Afghanistan in nearly 3 million people. And political assistance in the form of pressure on India to achieve peaceful resolution of the Kashmiri conflict in accordance with pertinent United Nations resolutions. This should be followed by

efforts to formalize agreements between India and Pakistan to refrain from nuclear proliferation. In addition, Pakistan's majority export industry, textiles, has suffered under the current crisis, more than half of its employees laid off already. Pakistan's economy could be stimulated through a suspension of import duties on Pakistani textiles, for example. Afghanistan's humanitarian needs are far more extensive. Over the past two decades of foreign invasion and civil war, virtually its entire infrastructure has been destroyed. Less than 12 percent of the Afghani population has access to safe drinking water, and the country is among the most heavily mined areas of the world. Removal of the mines to make the land safe again for its own inhabitants and rebuilding this infrastructure, water resources, roads and health care facilities are the immediate needs of Afghanistan. President Bush has wisely stated that nation building is not our task in Afghanistan. Humanitarian aid is necessary to allow the people of Afghanistan themselves to begin their own process of nation building. Two effective models for this exist in the region.

First, Bangladesh's Grameen Bank, which has provided micro loans averaging \$160 to over 2.3 million people, 94 percent of them women, with a 95 percent repayment rate. The World Bank and the International Food Research Policy Institute have documented the effectiveness of this model for development and empowerment, particularly of women. Of critical importance to this discussion, this kind of empowerment has proven effective as well in fighting against religious extremism. In the June 1996 elections in Bangladesh, the Islamic Society, a conservative party antagonistic to the west and oppressive of women, lost 14 of its 17 seats in Parliament. Another model potentially effective in nation building is to be found in neighboring Iran, where after 20 years of failed efforts at central planning, the government is experimenting with local initiatives. In the village of Lazor, for example, the townspeople have formed their own government, and with males and females working together, again successfully initiated training sessions for identifying and implementing solutions to local problems. In summary, there is a connection between religious intolerance and terrorism in the Muslim world, as well as oppression of women, I might add. The ultimate sources of this are the same for both: economic, social and political marginalization. Therefore the solutions are the same for both: reversing that marginalization through political and humanitarian assistance. We have begun the process. Secretary of State Powell stated at a conference last week that the United States has, quote, "an enormous obligation to not leave the Afghan people in the lurch, to not walk away as has been done in the past," end quote. This in clear recognition of the disastrous effects of ignoring the plight of the Afghan people following the withdrawal of the Soviet Union in 1989. President Bush has recently announced an initial commitment of \$320 million in this effort. This is a good beginning, but humanitarian support must be increased and distributed effectively in ways that empower the Afghan people to develop and guide their own nation building. Secretary Powell also announced last Sunday at a speech in Lexington, Kentucky, U.S. support for resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in accordance with United Nations Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338. This political support, together with continued support for negotiations between India and Pakistan with regard to Kashmir, is likewise an essential element in combatting both religious intolerance and terrorism. Augmenting these positive components in our campaign against terrorism is essential for promoting interreligious harmony in the Muslim world. Punitive efforts such as economic sanctions and political pressure on countries like Pakistan and Afghanistan will only increase the sense of victimization that feeds sectarian hostilities, particularly if that pressure is applied selectively rather than to all countries experiencing sectarian violence. After all, many of our closest allies, as Morton Halperin just noted, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel and India, also have problems in this regard. CHAIRMAN YOUNG: Dr. Sonn, you have one minute left. DR. SONN: Rather than punitive measures then, incentives will undoubtedly prove the most effective in combatting both sectarian violence and terrorism. Political support and humanitarian aid will demonstrate the vacuity of terrorist claims that the west, Christians and Jews in particular, are determined to destroy Islam. They will at the same time combat the conditions of poverty and hopelessness that provide ready recruits for terrorism by giving people better alternatives than suicide. In the process they will assure the security of our nation. Thank you.